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Anna Quincy Describes the “Cambridge Worthies,” 1833

Beverly Wilson Palmer

In the spring and summer of 1833, 21-year-old Anna Cabot Lowell Quincy kept a diary recording the social activities in Boston and Cambridge.¹ Because her father, Josiah, was then president of Harvard College, she was well positioned to observe the comings and goings in these communities. In Cambridge, a town of slightly over 6,000 residents, Harvard was then a small aspiring college. Only 212 students were enrolled as undergraduates, with 168 graduate students in the law, divinity, and medical schools. Professors and instructors for all of these schools totaled just 23 men.

Regularly, while the College was in session, Josiah Quincy and his family received visitors in their home, Wadsworth House, which stills stands today inside Harvard Yard. At these receptions, which featured cake, wine, and fruit as refreshments for students, faculty, and friends, the public rooms were often crowded. In the following description of one of these affairs, Anna Quincy refers to her sister Sophia and to a series of Harvard men: undergraduate Thomas P. Rutledge of South Carolina, class of 1835; law students Joseph S. Jones of Shocco, North Carolina, and William Richard Chaplain (“Leicester”) of Cambridge, Maryland. Francis Vinton, a West Point graduate, was also studying law at Harvard while stationed at Fort Independence in Boston. Betsy and the Major are servants in the Quincy household.

In this diary entry one can see a young woman who accepts, indeed enjoys, her role as both ironic observer and active participant in an academic setting. No Harvard

male escapes Anna's satiric scrutiny. In her introduction to this volume, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich alludes to Virginia Woolf's statement from *A Room of One's Own* that "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." But Anna's diary entry reduces these men and bears out Woolf's subsequent contention that, if a woman "begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished."² In fact, with the exception of Francis Vinton, who became a noted Episcopal clergyman in his day, none of the "Cambridge worthies" described here achieved any kind of fame or notoriety. Instead it is Anna Quincy's account that we will remember.

The "Cambridge Worthies"

Anna Quincy Diary

21 March 1833, Wadsworth House, Harvard College

Thursday 21st Came out of town--talked over the eveg &c-- The day was lowring, chilly, dark, the roads were deep & boggy, the night was dark & foggy, & we of course did not anticipate any of "our hens" would peck their way out here-- Indeed we should have been sorry to have seen any one from Boston-- We had all the Cambridge worthies & all our elite beaux, & only regretted we had not more belles-- Mr Rutlegdge first approached me, putting to flight some inferior being, who was daring to address me, we were soon joined by Mr Jones, who certainly would be classed by Mr [Gasport?] under the "Voluables"; these two youths amused themselves some time, & entertained me until

the superior form of Mr Chaplain approached & then they spread their wings, biddy gutterflies, as they are, & left the scene to Chaplain--& to me As the elevated & the refined, however they surpass the ~~frivolous~~ & ridiculous & the unmeaning, in actual merit, & agreeableness, is not as well fitted to entertain in the pages of a journal, I more frequently record the sayings of a Jones & a Vinton, rather than a Chaplains, tho' far more worthy.

I therefore pass over the next half hour, during which we took a tour into the next apartment, wandered for some time gasing at the varied beauties of Nature & art & at length paused to moralise before the declaration of independance,--which if "you recollect yourself my good girl", hangs over the fire place, in which was enkindled a hospitable flame-- But we were above such considerations & stept over the fender, in order to view more nearly same ancient worthy-- While we were standing the fire of patriotism, Sophia & Mr Vinton approached, -- & Mr Vinton with infinite humour, jocosely addressed us on the subject of our insensibility to all things around us, even to the elements.-- The haughty Leicester is the last person I should select to rally jocosely on any subject, & suddenly withdrawing from the offending fender, without taking any notice of Mr Vintons remarks, offered his arm, & "we sailed away to more secure repose"--& took our station before the shrine of Lafayette--³

Here we enjoyed the flow of soul for some time, & were deeply engaged in some interesting ~~disquis~~ topic, when without the least preparation, Mr Vintons head was thrust directly before us, in so startling a manner that even Leicester--started, & I almost leapt into the air-- Barbarous man! He broke the illusion, merely to ask me who that young

lady was--meaning Miss Randall. He then proceeded to remark that my sister was so kind, & “very obliging that she had gone upstairs to bring down a small glass bird for him”-- Thinks I the man is demented entirely, what on Earth can he mean--

“Glass bird” repeated I, with a bewildered air, reflected faintly indeed ~~perhaps~~, from the glance of my elevated companion. “Yes,” resumed Mr Vinton, “I believe it is a Peacock, at any rate it has a long tail of spun glass”. This explanation, though it threw light upon me, seemed to cap the climax of Leicesters amazement. With folded arms, & knit brows, he looked down upon us, with a glance that might have melted the spun glass of the Peacocks tail. I hastened to explain the glassworkers powers & then turned the conversation--while Mr Vinton skipt off.-- Soon after Miss Randall was prevailed upon to play--which she did extremely well. Soon after Sophia & Mr Vinton armed with the glass birds approached-- Sophia declared that when she showed the wonderful bird with the glass tail to Leicester that he like Mr Meadows took no sort of notice of it--while Mr Vintons more present soul, exclaimed, “wonderful beautiful, exquisite”--and such is the praise of which she is silly enough to be vain-- -- Miss Randall again played--and is certainly a first rate performer I should think, tho’ I must confess, mere instrumental music gives me but very little pleasure except when I am all alone.--

Talked to Rutledge some time--silly child--and then again to Mr Vinton, who is certainly an [amusing?] personage.-- He informed me that he was certain we had “one comfort in our house”-- “A great many, Mr Vinton, but to which do you allude” “Why” said he “I just looked in to the little parlour, & there I saw a woman, most industriously plying her needle, quite regardless of the company-- I am sure she must be a treasure”!--

Betty certainly little imagined, that she was the object of Mr Vintons attention--but I agreed & then followed an account of some old family servants' of the noble race of Vinton! I then thought I would go a touch beyond--, so I told him that we had a still more distinguished, member and entered into a description of our coachman, who was a Major of artillery!-- His astonishment was great, (second only to the Peacock with a glass tail)-- "Is it possible" exclaimed he. "A major of Artillery! why, Miss Quincy if we were called in to service, that man would rank above me"! Just at this moment the Major appeared, bearing in his hand not a sword, but a waiter,⁴ which he offered to us-- As soon as he had passed & turned away--Mr Vinton raises his hand to make the military salute, & bowing low says "I pay my respects to my Superior officer"-- It was quite smart of the youth I thought & certainly done very well.--

We then returned to the other room, where we had again a long & sentimental conversation, during which he enquired if I could inform him, how a gentleman was to know ~~how far~~ if he had penetrated into a ladys heart far enough to offer his own! I replied, "really Mr V I must leave that to yr own penetration". "Oh" said he "I was not referring to myself-- I am now in a mere butterfly State, roving from flower to flower but it was more for the future I wished to be informed--" Leaving Mr Vinton in his butterfly state, I lightly flew off & had varied talks with various mortals, & wound up the evening with a talk with Mr Jones of which no trace is left on my memory-- We had a pleasant evening & so ended the Levées of 1833.--

Notes

1. This extract is from the manuscript diary held at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass. The diary has been published as Anna Cabot Lowell Quincy, *A Woman's Wit and Whimsy: The 1833 Diary of Anna Cabot Lowell Quincy*, ed. Beverly Wilson Palmer (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003).
2. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929; 1981), 37.
3. Items making up the “shrine of Lafayette” were likely two armchairs with flag seats that Harvard apparently acquired when the Marquis de Lafayette visited the College in August 1824. Inventory of furniture in Wadsworth House, Feb. 17, 1849, President's Papers, E. Everett letters, vol. 2, Harvard University Archives).
4. A tray for carrying dishes.